ROBIN HOOD GARDENS – Notes by John Allan

Introduction

These notes have been prepared voluntarily as a means of clarifying my own thoughts in conjunction with the consideration for listing by English Heritage of the Robin Hood Gardens Estate. They document a process of thinking aloud and offer a personal opinion on the matter, but I remain quite open to hearing and being persuaded by the opinions of others.

Description of the Estate

First - a brief resume of the buildings themselves, which I first visited in the mid/late 1970s not long after they were originally completed. The estate comprises two blocks of residential accommodation of unequal length and height, one of 7 stories, one of 10 stories, cranked along their length with staircases and refuse chutes at the hinge points. Lifts are located at each end of both blocks. The dwelling units are accessed from decks every third level such that typically only the hall and kitchen (but depending on unit type sometimes also a bedroom and small toilet) occur on the entrance level where internal staircases then serve up or down to the living room and bedroom accommodation above or below. Secondary means of escape is provided by narrow continuous balconies alongside the bedroom levels. The decks and living rooms look outwards, the kitchens and bedrooms overlook the estate interior. The standardised reinforced concrete grid produces a regular window module throughout, though this is overlaid by a syncopated arrangement of projecting fins, which span vertically between floors on a wider module. The blocks are accessed from perimeter roadways lined with underblock garaging, leaving a central grassed landscaped area featuring a series of circular sunken playpen enclosures and two large conical mounds formed from construction debris. The estate boundary is protected by a concrete palisade.

The difficulties of listing

This is a particularly challenging case for consideration for at least three reasons – 1. the significant amount of recent attention the estate has received in the popular and professional press has made it 'a hot issue', which is not especially helpful for a process requiring careful evaluation, 2. the reportedly imminent possibility of disposal of the site and its redevelopment, which tends to blur the issue of listing with that of saving, and 3. the high profile status of the original architects, A & P Smithson, which tends to confuse opinions about the buildings with regard for the architects. These factors have to be put to one side if the technical question as to the estate's eligibility for listing is to be considered correctly and systematically.

The criteria for listing make it very clear what may <u>not</u> be taken into account – including for example the condition of a building, its 'popularity', or the imminence of its possible demolition. It is also understood that the notoriety of the architect is not to be conflated with the concept of 'special architectural interest' which is the key consideration – though it might conceivably contribute to the weight given to historic interest. (For example I suppose that otherwise unremarkable and indifferently laid brickwork at Chartwell might be of *historic* – rather than *architectural* - interest if it was known to have been laid personally by Winston Churchill.)

But before coming to the particularities of Robin Hood Gardens, it may be helpful to consider the background and circumstances of the architects themselves.

The Smithsons

Peter and Alison Smithson occupy a very particular place in the history of post-war British architecture. They were third generation modernists, belonging to the cohort of architects who had received the impacts of the original Modern Movement but had not practised in the pre-war period. Peter Smithson describes himself and Alison Smithson as 'inheritors of three European architectural languages – the

Swedish, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. (*The Charged Void - Architecture*, The Monacelli Press, 2001, p.19).

Rather as for the slightly older Denys Lasdun and others of this time, the great Modern Movement achievements of their elders were a legacy accepted with ambivalence. On the one hand the generation of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, et. al. were acknowledged as heroic intellectual and architectural pioneers, on the other they were to be subjected to intense critical evaluation in the search for new directions. Specifically, the Smithsons' central involvement with Team X and their part in the eventual dismantling of CIAM, the key international organisation of the 'old orthodoxy' is indicative of their challenging stance towards their immediate predecessors. From the start the Smithsons were pre-eminent in the effort to articulate a new theoretical platform for the future progress of the new architecture and urban planning and devoted enormous intellectual and creative energy to the polemics of this process.

Meanwhile, their position also needs to be located within the wider English architectural scene. The fledgling local modern movement may be seen to have established an important bridgehead with the 1951 Festival of Britain which effectively consolidated and showcased the collective achievement of early British Modernism in turning itself from the pursuit of a small pre-war coterie into the outlines of a new popular vocabulary for modern building and place-making. Accessible, light, bright, colourful and classless, the temporary Utopia on the South Bank offered the vision of a new social democratic, rather Swedish looking Britain, with the implied promise that with the drive for post-war reconstruction and the New Towns programme, such an environment would presently become available to everyone. In the event the Festival of Britain, in retrospect, could be seen to have been the closest ever rapprochement of modern architecture with the British public – the happy honeymoon before a loveless marriage.

But this comfortable assimilation cut no ice with the Smithsons and others of their circle who together struck out for different goals as the ‘angry young men’of British architecture. A gritty compound of surrogate proletarianism and raw material expression, the so-called ‘new Brutalism’ aimed to capture a rugged existential quality, that also embodied a peculiar hostility towards the ‘petit bourgeois’ Festival of Britain aesthetic and its popular respectability.

Thus far therefore the Smithsons may be seen as personifying a particular faction within British architecture – intellectual, anti consensus, non-conformist, articulate, intensely serious and, apparently with no sense of self-doubt in claiming the role of true representatives of working class culture as against the ‘false’ populism of their herbivorous adversaries.

As the 1950s were now to unfold, the next issue to consider is how they would fare in the world of architectural practice.

The Smithsons’ career development

Like several architects of this generation – eg. Powell & Moya; Gollins, Melvin & Ward; Chamberlin, Powell & Bon - the Smithsons got their first real break by winning a competition – the Hunstanton School in Norfolk. But unlike these architects and many others they were not so successful thereafter – losing a whole string of high profile design contests – Coventry Cathedral (1950-1), Golden Lane Housing (1952), Sheffield University (1953), Sydney Opera House (1956), Berlin Hauptstadt (1957) and others later. It is probably necessary to remember the importance at that time – particularly for architects with no particular social connections, like the Smithsons, who came from the north-east - of architectural competitions as a means of accessing major building opportunities. It was the only way, particularly if entries were anonymous, whereby you could bypass social advantage and get ahead by sheer talent.

But unlike most unsuccessful competitors, who get over the disappointment of losing and move on, and whose schemes are quietly forgotten, the Smithsons' entries received spectacular and lasting critical interest and acclaim. Virtually every published history of post-war architecture in Britain lauds the Smithsons' competition schemes for Golden Lane and Sheffield University with now familiar images and pages of approbatory coverage while often not even mentioning or illustrating the projects that actually won these competitions and were built. It is as though the Smithsons achieved all the recognition that goes to winners of competitions without ever having the responsibility or experience of turning their concepts into real buildings and seeing if they work. Indeed their own published *oeuvres complets* are dominated by drawings of unrealised projects.

There is surely something to be drawn from this unusual combination of recognition and failure. For here was a highly ambitious, intellectually intense partnership (who were also married and seem literally to have 'lived and breathed' architecture 24/7), who were initially projected into prominence through a high profile success – Hunstanton School - and then found themselves repeatedly rejected by potential clients in favour of seemingly less talented or intelligent rivals, yet were simultaneously regarded with awe and admiration by their professional peer group, architectural critics and historians and a growing audience of dazzled students.

To this unusual predicament may be added what can be discerned about the personality of the architects themselves. The propensity for self-dramatisation, for fastidiously writing up their own story, for hoarding and exhibiting virtually every scrap of paper over decades, obsessively noting every utterance and assiduously recording its date, author, origin and circumstances, presents the picture of an intensely introspective, narcissistic, sensibility that in the evidential record is yet further reinforced by a bizarre desire to embellish their published writings with numerous photographs of themselves – usually looking straight to camera – as if to minimise or preferably eliminate any conceivable risk of ever being forgotten. Such

extreme self-absorption seems to suggest an anxiety not so much for writing their own history before *anyone* else did, but in case *nobody* else did.

And although it is not uncommon for architects, who are repeatedly denied the opportunity to build, sublimating their frustration on other creative pursuits, it is difficult to think of any other architect of their generation who devoted quite so much energy to preparing and furnishing their own legacy. Being sufficiently perceptive, romantic and historically informed to realise that by a small accident of timing they had just missed the start of the greatest cultural event since the Renaissance, the Smithsons it seems, were interested in only one thing as much as modern architecture itself – namely ensuring and documenting a place for themselves in its grand unfolding legend.

Implications for the understanding of Robin Hood Gardens

I suggest there is something in the Smithsons' peculiar story that may illuminate the understanding of Robin Hood Gardens. This was their first significant experience of building a large social housing project – possibly the supreme objective of modern architecture at the time. And it came nearly a decade and a half after they had lost the Golden Lane Competition, their entry for which had by then been assimilated into professional folklore as 'the moral winner' and a radical prototype.

In the meantime of course the key idea in that scheme – the so-called 'street in the air' – had been taken up and built by others, most notably at Park Hill, Sheffield on a site more suitable and at a scale more ambitious than anything the Smithsons themselves could have dreamt of. Other versions of the idea of communal association 'off the ground' had also by now been explored at, for example, Usk Street by Denys Lasdun (1955-58). Thus, in addition to the professional acclamation of their Golden Lane scheme, its apparently successful realisation at Park Hill must have seemed an irrefutable vindication of its key idea.

Thus, at last now given the chance to build out their 'signature concept' (which in fact originated earlier in the works of Le Corbusier and by now had ceased to be radical), it is not difficult to see why the Smithsons would have turned in on themselves and used the commission of Robin Hood Gardens to vindicate the lost vision of Golden Lane, and to some extent also Sheffield University (where their competition scheme had been informed by similar principles). And so in the profoundly unpromising setting of the Blackwall Tunnel approach they eventually brought forth their long cherished 'streets in the air' scheme – which in reality was little more that a gallery access housing estate - when the world at large had long since moved on. (As a young architect at the GLC at the time I can still recall the profound disappointment in the Housing Section when it was first published.)

What we see therefore is a housing project that is cloaked in the rhetoric of a decade and a half earlier being presented as if it proposed the way forward, but which most of their acolytes, and probably even some of their peers, were too loyal or too trusting to criticise as an idea whose time had passed. To read the Smithsons' own description of their motives is indeed to witness the extent to which their quest for historical greatness had apparently obscured almost all sense of responsibility to the realities of the opportunity, the situation and what might have been learnt since their first ideas for urban housing fifteen years earlier.

"This building for the socialist dream – which is something different from simply complying with a programme written by the socialist state – was for us a Roman activity and Roman at many levels:

- in that it takes its stand alongside the heroisms of what has been made before – the port and the roads…
- in that it is as heroic as supplying a Romanised city with water…
- in that it wants to be universal, greater than our little state – related to a greater law." *The Charged Void*, p.296

The imperial tenor of their ambition, their portrayal of the project as a grand heroic enterprise resonating across centuries, countries and cultures have all the ingredients of hubristic tragedy. “Our intention has always been…to turn architecture towards particularity…of place, person, activity: the form to arise from these”, wrote Peter Smithson in 1997, apparently unaware of the irony of this pronouncement...“to use a military analogy, the realised buildings are objectives we have taken; they are not the intention of the war”. (*op. cit*. p. 11.)

Thus, having championed the brave mission to supersede the supposedly anonymous precepts of *La Ville Radieuse*, with its insouciant disregard of the particularities of history and place, and its progeny of bleak estates and rectangular flatted blocks, the Smithsons arrive in their own *cul-de-sac* – a system of urban morphology that bore no practical relation to existing city fabric, local people, implementation programmes or municipal budgets and which even in its most determined and systematically planned application – the High Walk system of the City of London – could not be sustained over more than a few bridges beyond the Barbican. Indeed the attempt to reproduce ground level conditions off the ground has proved to be one of the most tenaciously elusive and problematic objectives that modern architects have ever set themselves.

Parallel progressive developments

In 1961, five years before Robin Hood Gardens was started, Jane Jacobs published her celebrated and savage attack on modernist architecture and city planning and its arrogant disregard of the real social functions and urban benefits of streets, of diversified use and ground level movement - (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, 1961) - but this seems not to have registered with the Smithsons – or at least not in any way affecting the development of Robin Hood Gardens. And all the time RHG was building the real radical thought in urban housing was moving on – not only architecturally but also organisationally. In place of the large comprehensive redevelopment projects of the ‘50s and ‘60s would

shortly arrive the more local and responsive activities of the Housing Association movement, with its growing financial autonomy, dedicated management arrangements and local responsiveness. Inner urban housing schemes – with exceptions, to be sure - were generally becoming characterised by more modest cellular layouts, with densely planned low or medium rise development overlooking identifiable areas of landscaped open space that connected to existing streets and were not predicated on large monolithic infrastructures. In terms of the theory and practice of progressive urban housing, Robin Hood Gardens was obsolete even before its first tenants moved in.

Evaluation of RHG against listing criteria

So – to return to the opening question of these notes and the matter of listing - it is for all these reasons that despite the powerful and poignant storey that this estate undoubtedly has to tell us - I am disinclined to regard it as 'seminal' or of 'special architectural interest' in the sense demanded by listing criteria. The 'streets in the air' (described as 'decks' on the drawings), are certainly wider than the conventional access galleries used in housing schemes of this period – approx 2m at RHG (not counting the recessed bays for the entrance doorways), compared with the 1.2m norm. But there is little else to distinguish them and unlike Park Hill, where the natural topography enabled the lower decks to run out at ground level, here they are only accessed by conventional lifts and stairs. There is nothing comparable to the planted richness and spatial variety of the decks at the exactly contemporaneous (and rightly listed) Lillington Gardens which really *was* seminal and *did* make a radical impact on housing design thereafter.

Meanwhile the dwelling plans, though systematic and well-proportioned, are otherwise not especially remarkable. The secondary escape runways resulting from contemporaneous changes to fire regulations whereby it was deemed unsatisfactory to rely on rescue services (with Merryweather wheeled escape ladders) in duplex dwellings above 2nd floor level meant that architects were obliged

to make provision for residents to evacuate their dwellings by other means than the primary staircase. Narrow escape galleries connecting all the bedrooms along one facade were the conventional pragmatic solution, but represented a considerable compromise in security. (It is possible that the regulations actually changed during the design development, causing this expedient adaptation – though this could be checked.)

Two other shortcomings that may be noted are, first, the superimposition of different tenancies over/under the other that results from the sectional arrangement and staircase layout, and second, the absence of any private external space or balconies associated with either the kitchens or the living rooms of any of the upper dwelling units. The use of a single standardised window frame regardless of which type of room it occurs in, whilst possibly economically expedient, is also a feature about which many architects would probably have misgivings. Beyond this it must be acknowledged that the overall estate does convey the Brutalist aesthetic at a dramatic scale and certainly imposes its own personality on this particular location in Tower Hamlets.

In my opinion therefore, whilst it is fair to say that the estate is of definite architectural interest, it is difficult to argue that it exhibits 'special architectural interest' in comparative relation to the contemporary social housing of its period. And while one could ponder whether were it to have been built fifteen years earlier, when the main formative concept was still novel, this conclusion might be different, one could equally ask whether the question would be posed in quite the same way if the buildings had been the work A N other architect, rather than the Smithsons.

Saving, but not listing

These reflections are emphatically not to suggest that Robin Hood Gardens should not be retained, repaired, upgraded and regenerated in order to reverse the decades of underinvestment that it has certainly suffered. There must also be

compelling sustainability reasons for avoiding scrapping such vast quantities of embodied energy – to say nothing of the reported desire of a section of the local community to remain. Moreover it is not to deny that there may also be important opportunities to 'add value' to the estate by judicious additional development.

And, since there is no doubt that the estate has definite architectural character and interest it would be vital that any such works be conceived not crudely or inconsiderately, but sympathetically and intelligently with a close understanding of the original buildings and their architects. In other words the objective should not be to camouflage RHG with the conventional makeover, crazy colour schemes, and bolt-on bling, but to re-present it in a way that conveys its underlying character whilst addressing its various technical problems in order to provide a sustainable 21st century living environment.

These personal conclusions may seem a somewhat harsh judgment on architects of undoubted importance in the story of post-war British architecture – especially coming from an ardent devotee of modernism. But one must remember that it is buildings that are listed, not architects, and incidentally that the Smithsons do already have 3 deservedly listed buildings to their credit. From the above reflections I am presently of the view that RHG fails the listing test specifically because the very aspect in which it would need to be deemed of 'special architectural interest' – its attempted realisation of the streets-in-the-air concept - was at best partial and no longer of the radical significance claimed for it, and because its other attributes though certainly of interest are insufficient to justify listing in themselves.

I have little doubt that this estate could and should be rehabilitated with handsome results, but this is a different issue from the question of listing. Good precedents exist for high quality refurbishment and upgrade of post-war housing schemes without the support (or constraints) of listing – and it is this emerging tradition of

imaginative modern regeneration that, in my opinion, should now inform the future of Robin Hood Gardens.

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